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Judgment Day

The Workers' Stage and the Popular Front in 1930s Finland

MIKKO-OLAVI SEPPÄLÄ

ABSTRACT

The Workers' Stage (in Finnish 'Työväen Näyttämö') was an amateur workers' theatre based in Helsinki. The theatre experienced its height of success when it co-operated with left-wing intellectuals between 1934 and 1939. As an organic part of the Popular Front movement, the theatre brought an international anti-fascist repertoire to Finland. In the performance of Elmer Rice's *Judgment Day* (1935) the struggle for civil rights in Finland was put in the larger frame of the international struggle against Fascism. Unit-ing intellectuals and workers, the theatre and its activist personnel also functioned as a platform for the practical organising of counter-hegemonic intervention and under-ground activism. For the activist left-wing opposition, theatre functioned as an extension of their political journals, as a (counter-)public sphere and a vehicle for highlighting contemporary political problems, accelerating public discussion and engaging more people – workers and intellectuals alike – in fruitful interaction. The activism had clear political results in the 1936 elections, although the personal outcome for the activist artists and communists turned out to be controversial, as they remained rejected from the new hegemony.

KEYWORDS

Political theatre; Workers' theatre; Activism; 1930s Finnish theatre; Elmer Rice; Popular Front.

Judgment Day

The Workers' Stage and Popular Front in 1930s Finland

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I consider a 1930s political theatre as an organic part of the political activism of the time, deploying political scientist Chantal Mouffe's concept of 'counter-hegemonic intervention'. The Workers' Stage (in Finnish 'Työväen Näyttämö') was an amateur workers' theatre based in Helsinki. Founded in 1916, the Worker's Stage experienced its height of success when it co-operated with left-wing intellectuals between 1934 and 1939, as outlined below. The article looks at how the theatre brought an international anti-fascist repertoire to Finland and how, in and around the performances, the struggle for civil rights in Finland was put in the larger frame of the international struggle against Fascism. I will concentrate on the performance of Elmer Rice's drama *Judgment Day* in May 1935, considered to be the European premiere of the play, as a culmination of the early phase of the Finnish Popular Front movement. Decades later, this performance was canonized as the major anti-fascist act within Finnish theatre in the 1930s, but in their own time, how successful and influential was the theatre and the performance?

COUNTER-HEGEMONIC INTERVENTION AND THEATRE

According to Chantal Mouffe, there is always an aesthetic dimension in the political and a political dimension in art. Instead of 'political art', she prefers the concept of 'critical art' working through emotions at the affective level and showing alternatives to the dominant order or consensus. Mouffe thus sees artistic activism as disrupting 'counter-hegemonic interventions'.¹ Like Mouffe, Claire Bishop also argues that activist art cannot bring about a political or social change on its own: "art has to hand over to other institutions."²

Based on Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, historians of the labour movements in the 1970s outlined a 'counter public sphere' ('proletarian' or 'plebeian' public sphere) of working-class publicity.³ Distancing herself both from Habermas' rational consensual view and Marxist antagonism, Chantal Mouffe speaks of an 'agonistic public space' allowing the confrontation of conflicting opinions.⁴ Developing on Mouffe's idea on affectionate agonism and stressing the imaginative character of theatre, Christopher Balme uses the concept of 'theatrical public sphere', arguing that a theatre performance can lead to and intervene in a wider socio-political discourse. With regard to 1920s Germany, for example, Balme writes how theatre scandals had a long-term impact outside the theatre, "in the press, the law courts, even parliament."⁵

The press and law courts also played their role in the case I am looking at. Closely connected with the 1930s Workers' Stage and sharing its goals, three left-wing cultural journals (*Tulenkantajat*, *Kirjallisuuslehti* and *Soihtu*) intervened in the public discussion and tried to affect Finnish politics. In a way, from the activist journalists' point of view, the whole Workers' Stage from 1934 on could be seen as an extension of the interventionist journals. However, the theatre offered something that the journals lacked. In addition to the critical theatre performances representing modern 'proletarian theatre' of the time, the theatre

¹ Mouffe 2013, 91-9.

² Bishop 2012, 283.

³ Lottes 1979, 110-12.

⁴ Mouffe 2013, 91-2.

⁵ Balme 2014, 15, 32, 155, 202.

grew important as a physical gathering point, offering a public space where various people could meet each other, where counter-hegemonic ideas and sentiments could be expressed and exchanged in relative freedom (but under observation of the state police). Having received a permanent shelter in a newly built Printing Workers' House in the spring of 1935, the Workers' Stage functioned as a focal point and platform for a larger counter-hegemonic intervention that tried to challenge the dominant political order and repressive atmosphere in Finland.

Combining with the theatre, a group of journalists, artists, and workers joined forces in a wide range of political activities, e.g. collecting signatures on petitions, and campaigning for political candidates as well as victims of the Spanish Civil War. Thus, the theatre functioned as an important part of the so-called Popular Front movement in Finland.

POPULAR FRONT AND CULTURAL FRONT

Popular Front meant gathering socialist and liberal minded people against the threat of fascism. It also had a more specific meaning as an official communist strategy. Supported by Leon Trotsky already after Mussolini seized power in Italy in 1922,⁶ Popular Front became the official strategy of the Communist International (Comintern) in the summer of 1935, replacing the earlier Extreme Leftist strategy that had stressed the class struggle, revolution and fight against the social democrats. The Popular Front policy was formulated by the new leader of the Comintern, Bulgarian communist, Georgi Dimitrov, who, having been accused of the Reichstag fire, had successfully defended himself against Hermann Göring and the Nazi regime in the notorious Leipzig court case.⁷ Boosting the popular support of communist parties in many countries,⁸ the Finnish state police saw Popular Front and its call for a fight against fascism as a communist endeavour. In Finland, this opinion had a wider appeal and tended to isolate the Finnish Popular Front as a group of left-wing radicals and irre-

⁶ Rosengarten 2014, 25, 35.

⁷ Rentola 2002, 64.

⁸ Rønning 2015, 47.

sponsible demagogues. After all, Finland being the neighbouring country to the Soviet Union and many Finnish communists living in Soviet exile, a Bolshevik intervention was seen as a real security risk.

However, in several Western democracies, the Finnish activist intellectuals looked at, the civil rights and anti-fascist movements known as Popular Front had a large popular support. In his study on 1930s America, Michael Denning stresses that the potentially infiltrating or manipulating communists were very much in the minority of the mass social movement of the Popular Front.⁹ According to Denning, “the culture of the Popular Front transformed the ways people imagined the globe [...] in its daily work of helping refugees, organizing tours, and holding benefit performances and dances for Spanish and Russian war relief.”¹⁰ As for the Finnish Popular Front, international contacts were vital for gathering impetus to the national or local struggle. Like elsewhere, the Popular Front movement in Finland stressed anti-fascism, pacifism, and civil rights.¹¹

THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN 1930S FINLAND

The rise of the civil rights movement and formation of the Popular Front in 1930s Finland can be seen as a reaction to the repressive legislation enforced and suggested by the government. The question of insufficient civil rights was felt especially among the communists. In fear of a new revolution after the Finnish Civil War in 1918, the Finnish state had gradually criminalized communism by 1930. Introduced under the pressure of the popular right-wing or fascist Lapua movement in 1930, the so-called Communist Acts abolished all left-wing organizations and newspapers labelled as communist, and resulted in a lot of workers' houses being closed down and communist youth imprisoned and deprived of their political rights. Also at risk, the Social Democratic Party managed to maintain its freedom of action. After the Lapua movement's failed *coup d'état* in 1932, the Finnish government felt threatened by two anti-democratic movements: the fascist movement organised in 1933 and also as a political party

⁹ Denning 1996, 10, 107.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹ Koivisto 2015, 99-100, 109.

(Patriotic People's Movement, IKL, with some 8 percent of the votes), and the scattered underground communist activity. Consequentially, police forces were strengthened.¹² In 1934, the government issued a so-called Agitation Law, thus criminalizing the defaming of the social order, courts, and the public authorities, and consequentially launched several libel actions against the liberal press and fiction writers who had criticized or mocked public authorities, priests, or the Bible (on the basis of the old Blasphemy Act). In order to eradicate symbolic political protests, the government also introduced the so-called Shirt Law and Flag Law banning the use of political flags and the wearing of political symbols and uniforms, e.g. red shirts, in public.¹³ In the autumn of 1934, even a law enabling forced eugenic sterilization was suggested.

The wake-up call for activism, for the formation of the Finnish Popular Front, took place in the winter of 1935 when the reintroduction of the death penalty was proposed, as one of the leading Finnish communists Toivo Antikainen had been imprisoned in November 1934. Liberal and left-wing intellectuals now started to co-operate and launched a petition against the death penalty. With the Workers' Stage functioning as a focal point and organized workers taking care of the practicalities, the petition received 120 000 signatures and led to the founding of the Finnish League for Civil Rights in November 1935. Widening the former left-wing project of aiding political prisoners, the new union defended civil rights, democracy, and democratic culture.¹⁴

On an organizational level, the co-operation in defence of civil rights linked the Peace Union of Finland, the Academic Socialist Society, and the Tulenkantajat Society at the beginning of 1935.

On an ideological level, this meant co-operation between pacifists, Marxists, and pan-Europeans.

Having already carefully observed the communist youth, the state police now followed the left-leaning intellectuals and politicians who collaborated with them

¹² Hietaniemi 1992, 171-2.

¹³ Hentilä 2006, 163; Kekkonen 1999, 80-1.

¹⁴ Rules of the Finnish League for Civil Rights 1 November 1935, Coll. 8, Erkki Vala's archive, SKS Literary Archive; See also: Saarela 2002, 51.

with suspicion. Communist isolation had indeed started to break. Pleased with the growing counter-hegemonic activism, the Finnish communists in the Soviet Union tried to encourage the left-wing intellectuals by funding the Academic Socialist Society and its magazine *Soihtu*. By the year of 1935, the Finnish Communist Party directed its material support also to the independent leftist cultural journals *Kirjallisuuslehti* and *Tulenkantajat*.¹⁵

Relatively feeble, the civil rights movement had as its figurehead the liberal professor Väinö Lassila. However, the key person linking the left with the liberals and the young with the old was the journalist Erkki Vala (1902-91). Leader of the Tulenkantajat Society and publisher of the magazine *Tulenkantajat*, Vala had shifted from the liberal camp to the social democrats in the beginning of the 1930s. An independent media for political and cultural debate, *Tulenkantajat* was popular among socialists and liberals alike and especially appealed to young people. Having started as a cultural magazine, *Tulenkantajat* now openly fought the Fascists and repressive politics in Central Europe and Finland, campaigning for the constitutional democratic rights and freedom of speech which Vala and the left-wing radicals felt were at stake.

Having a wide readership, *Tulenkantajat*, in the eyes of the authorities, was considered to be the most dangerous of the three magazines. As the editor-in-chief, Erkki Vala was convicted in 1934-36 several times for publishing short stories and other writings that, according to the Ministry of Justice, defamed the authorities.¹⁶ When charged with blasphemy in February 1935 after having published extracts of Jaroslav Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Vala fought back and brought the process international fame.¹⁷ Afterwards he printed these scandalous novels through his publishing house.¹⁸

¹⁵ Saarela 2015, 172-4.

¹⁶ The decision of the Turku Court of Appeal 17 April 1935, Coll. 8, Erkki Vala's Archive, SKS Literary Archive.

¹⁷ Erkki Vala's open letter to the Minister of Justice Allan Serlachius, *Tulenkantajat* 23 February 1935.

¹⁸ Erkki Vala's research interview 1973-74, Coll. 3, Erkki Vala's archive, SKS Literary Archive.

However, the cultural front was not altogether united, as there were tensions between the radical and moderate socialists and the liberals. Stressing the independent nature of his magazine, Vala's authority also came under question by the radicalized academic socialists resulting in a rift in 1935. However, what was the role of the Workers' Stage in the Popular Front movement?

THE WORKERS' STAGE, INTELLECTUALS AND INTERNATIONAL CONTACTS

During the 1920s, part of the Finnish workers' theatres had belonged to left-wing associations and featured a class-conscious repertoire. In Finland, there were no possibilities, however, for an agitprop movement compared with other European countries.¹⁹ Having suffered from the anti-communist campaign, the surviving workers' theatres of the 1930s were careful and avoided a too explicitly political repertoire. Criticizing this policy, the young academic socialists tried to encourage workers' theatres to perform only plays that would contribute to the class struggle. The *Tulenkantajat* magazine openly declared that it would support amateur workers' theatres to develop themselves into 'struggling proletarian theatres'.²⁰

A minor amateur workers' theatre consisting of socialist workers,²¹ the Workers' Stage consequentially turned to Erkki Vala and the *Tulenkantajat* magazine and asked the intellectuals to help them in running the theatre and planning the repertoire. In August 1934, The Workers' Stage chose its new direction among the circles around the *Tulenkantajat* magazine and the Academic Socialist Society. The new leaders of the theatre were two young art critics – firstly, 26-year old socialist journalist Helmer Adler, who served as director of the theatre board, and secondly, 23-year old law student Nyrki Tapiovaara, who was appointed as the artistic leader in October 1934 as the group realized that they

¹⁹ Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove 1985.

²⁰ E.g. *Tulenkantajat* 24 February 1934, 17 March 1934 and 18 August 1934.

²¹ Among active and identified members of the theatre at that time there was a barber, a brazier, a cobbler, an electrician, a laundryman and a tailor. At least five out of the eight actors were known to be communists and at least two of them had already been convicted. The files of Ludvig Korpi, Gustaf Laitinen, Yrjö Nykänen, and Hulda Virtanen, The Archive of the State Police, The National Archives.

needed someone to direct the plays.²² Tapiovaara's brother, artist Tapio Tapiovaara, became the scenographer. Other members of the theatre board were Erkki Vala and two young academic socialists, Mauri Ryömä and his wife Elvi Sinervo who wrote novels and directed the speech choirs of the Socialist Youth Club in Helsinki.

The new theatre management immediately started to look for a proper proletarian repertoire from abroad. As the German political theatre had been crushed following the Nazi's rise to power and its foremost figures, Erwin Piscator, Ernst Toller, and Bertolt Brecht, lived in exile, the new theatre sent inquiries to several institutions and individuals in eight countries altogether. Helmer Adler described: "When we first started this endeavour we had nothing but a clear theoretical sight about the proper relation between theatre and politics in the class-struggle and some journalistic information on the proletarian theatre in different countries."²³ In the summer of 1935, Adler even travelled to Moscow to meet Piscator in order to establish contacts with the International League of Revolutionary Theatres (IRTB/MORT), a Comintern-based organization that tried to strengthen the international network of proletarian theatres and spread goodwill towards the Soviet Union.²⁴

In his artistic manifesto in the spring of 1935, Nyrki Tapiovaara wrote respectfully about the Russian and German theatrical traditions leading to Meyerhold and Piscator. He depicted theatre as a weapon in the workers' struggle for a more free and powerful life in a capitalist society. According to Tapiovaara, contemporary proletarian theatre spoke with righteous and powerful pathos and presented vital and brave working-class protagonists.²⁵

The young radicals received some support from the former generation. A communist sympathizer, the middle-aged playwright Hella Wuolijoki, for example, offered the theatre her translation of a contemporary Soviet drama, Nikolai Pogodin's *Snow* (in Russian *Sneg*, performed in Finnish by the name *Me*

²² Vala 1934.

²³ Adler 1935a, 122. Translation M.-O.S.

²⁴ Adler 1935b, 389-93, 406. See also: Pike 1982.

²⁵ Tapiovaara 1935, 120-1.

nousemme huipulle).²⁶ However, according to Adler, there were practical as well as general problems regarding the status of Soviet drama in Finland. Beside the fact that it was illegal to import Soviet drama to Finland, the subject matter tended often to be too far away from life in Western societies.²⁷ With regard to American drama, the Workers' Stage had better success.

A debut for the new director Tapiovaara, I. J. Golden's *Precedent* (1931) premiered in October 1934 under the Finnish title *Lakonjohtaja*. Called 'a drama of real life' by the author, the documentary play staged the notorious court case of Thomas J. Mooney (in the play Thomas Delaney), a labour organiser who had been convicted of the terrorist attacks in San Francisco in 1916. As the performances in Helsinki were labelled as a 'communist demonstration' in the fascist press, the left-wing newspapers cited the same phrases in order to advertise the event while strongly built bouncers made sure that no right-wing demonstrations would take place during the performance.²⁸ Academic Socialists welcomed the performance as a starting point for a wider trend of "socialist experimental theatre" that should be introduced all over the country.²⁹

Pleased by the good start, Helmer Adler declared that the theatre had established contacts with an American theatre in the winter of 1935 and would continue to receive a 'repertoire of struggle' from across the Atlantic. "America is the only bourgeois country in the world with a living proletarian theatre", he wrote.³⁰ Largely a German (and Finnish) immigrant phenomenon still in the 1920s, the workers' theatre movement in Northern America had grown rapidly under the influence of the German and Soviet agitprop theatre during the Depression in the early 1930s.³¹

Established international contacts did not mean, however, that the Workers' Stage would have managed to break the isolation of left-wing radicalism within

²⁶ Pogodin 1934, 5-6.

²⁷ Adler 1935a, 122-3.

²⁸ *Ajan Suunta* 28 November 1934 and 11 December 1934; *Tulenkantajat* 27 October 1934.

²⁹ Palmgren 1934.

³⁰ Adler 1935a, 123-4.

³¹ Friedman 1985, 111-14.

Finland. Would the Workers' Stage be able to influence other theatres as well as cultural and political life in Finland?

JUDGMENT DAY

Another tribunal drama with clear points of contact with real-life events, Elmer Rice's *Judgment Day* premiered at the Workers' Stage in Adler's translation on 14 May 1935. The performance took place in the Printing Workers' new building, which now became the centre for left-wing cultural activism. The play had premiered in New York only eight months earlier and the Finnish performance was labelled as the European premiere of the play – although the author most likely did not know anything about it, since the amateur stage did not ask for permission nor pay royalties to foreign countries.

Actually, American socialists had been quite critical of Rice's new play. Theatre critique for the journal of the American workers' theatres *New Theatre*, Ben Blake, was disappointed with *Judgment Day*. According to Blake, Rice was an idealistic liberal catering to middle-class audiences although it was actually the working-class audience that enjoyed his plays which were "anti-fascist without being revolutionary or even the least bit radical."³² Although *New Theatre* was read with enthusiasm even in Helsinki, Blake's view was not considered to be a problem. According to the *Tulenkantajat* magazine, *Judgment Day* was about the courage to resist dictatorship, to resist the oppression of civil rights, and the deprivation of justice.³³

Based on the Leipzig court case against the communists accused of the Reichstag fire in Berlin in 1933, the anti-fascist play is set in a nameless country in Eastern Europe. The alleged crime in the play is the attempted assassination of the dictatorial leader of the National Party, Vesnic (meaning 'forever' in Romanian). If Vesnic bears similarities with Adolf Hitler, his Minister of Culture and Enlightenment, Rakovski, is shaped after ministers Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels, who participated in the Leipzig process. In addition, two of the defendants, the mentally disabled Kurt Schneider and the main protagonist

³² Blake 1934, 17.

³³ *Tulenkantajat* 11 May 1935.

George Khitov, had their real-life counterparts in Marinus van der Lubbe and Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian communist who was seen as the hero of Leipzig process, and later became the leader of the Comintern. These similarities were also stressed before the premiere in the theatre's press release and in articles in *Tulenkantajat* and *Kirjallisuuslehti* magazines.³⁴

Under the pressure of the dictatorial regime, the old judge, Slatarski, refuses to give up the principles of justice. In his final speech, defence attorney Conrad (played in Helsinki by poet Viljo Kajava) points out that the whole world is following the court case: "Ten thousand newspapers in a hundred countries have carried daily reports of this case."³⁵ In his turn, the defendant George Khitov accuses the dictator:

I charge him with tyranny, cruelty, ruthlessness, and wholesale slaughter, with annihilating the liberties of the people and the institutions of justice. I charge him with destroying the precious heritage of our science and our art and with sending into exile the flower of our intellectual life. I charge him with sowing the seeds of terror and hatred. I charge him with racial and religious fanaticism, with deliberately endangering the peace of the world. I charge him with the murder of the thousands of innocent men and women who perished on the scaffold, in the torture chamber, and in the concentration camps.³⁶

The script of the performance has not been preserved, but, according to the critics as well as the playbill of the theatre's revival of the play in 1944-45, it seems that the finale of the play had been slightly changed as the character of the dictator had been left out. In the original play, the fascist leader appears in the final scene and is accidentally killed by the old judge, Slatarski. In the Helsinki performance, the action may have taken place off-stage. However, as in the original play, the Helsinki performance ended with the suicide of the shocked old judge. Before shooting himself, Slatarski shouts, 'Down with tyranny! Long live the people!'³⁷

³⁴ *Kirjallisuuslehti* 5/1935, p. 128; *Tulenkantajat* 11 May 1935; *Helsingin Sanomat* 14 May 1935, p. 2.

³⁵ Rice 1950, 367.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 369.

³⁷ The playbill of the *Judgment Day* at the Workers' Stage 1944-45, Coll. Dc, Tapio Tapiovaara's archive, The People's Archives. See also: Rice 1950, p. 371; Savutie 1935.

Being close promoters of the theatre, Erkki Vala and Maija Savutie wrote positive critiques of the performance in the *Tulenkantajat* and *Kirjallisuuslehti* magazines.³⁸ The leading newspaper of the political left, *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* (*The Social Democrat of Finland*) sent Emil Lindahl to review the performance. A veteran of the first wave of the proletarian culture in Finland, Lindahl had promoted an autonomous working-class culture and class-conscious repertoire for workers' theatres in the early 1920s.³⁹ Now, he was more sceptical. Lindahl admired the play, but considered the performance to be modest, while the actors declared their lines in a pathetic manner. He suspected that the new leaders of the amateur theatre prioritized imported topical drama over the smoothness of performance.⁴⁰ It seems that Lindahl's reserved view also reflected the tensions between the intellectuals and the workers on the one hand and between the young radicals and the older generation of socialists on the other.

The leading liberal newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* also published a review of the performance. It was written by law student and film critic Arvo Ääri. Although sympathetic towards his colleague Nyrki Tapiovaara, Ääri was critical about the political nature of the performance and how "the director has turned the dramatic ending of the play to pure political propaganda."⁴¹

The play was reported to have five performances with a packed audience. However, the adverse critique both in the main social democrat and liberal newspapers seem to tell that the Workers' Stage and its version of political theatre were rejected by the moderate mainstream.

REAL-LIFE DRAMA AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC INTERVENTION

If we move the focus away from the actual performance and its somewhat adverse reception and consider the theatre as an organic part of a larger activist movement, the picture changes. The rehearsals and performances allowed vari-

³⁸ Vala 1935, 3; Savutie 1935.

³⁹ Lindahl 1921, 17-20.

⁴⁰ Lindahl 1935, 4.

⁴¹ Ääri 1935, 7.

ous people to gather and become cohesive, to organize and celebrate the ongoing political struggle.

More than any other production of the Workers' Stage, the performance of *Judgment Day* featured a number of intellectuals (journalists and writers) assisting the regular working-class amateurs. In retrospect, some of them depicted the experience of being involved in this performance as being similar to participating in an anti-fascist demonstration. In their memoirs, reality and theatre melted together and they only remembered the real-life characters that they had been playing. For instance, the liberal newspaperman and writer Matti Kurjensaari remembered having played 'Göring' (Rakovski) – although the part was actually played by another newspaperman, the social democrat Viljo Kohonen. Many recalled how well poet Arvo Turtiainen had performed 'van der Lubbe' – and did not refer to the character, Schneider.⁴² Turtiainen himself later wrote: "That role threw me to the pit hole of fascism. I learned to hate everything that had the slightest flavour of fascism in it."⁴³

The accuracy of the play had to do with the situation in Finland. Used as a symbol for how fascist regimes tried to deny the human rights of the communists, the court case of the Reichstag fire in Berlin was well known in Finland even before the performance. In addition to the petition against the death penalty related to the Toivo Antikainen case, the activist journalists Erkki Vala and Jarno Pennanen (editor-in-chief for *Kirjallisuuslehti*) had their own on-going court cases. Vala was active in bringing the Švejk-case international fame, while Pennanen, at the time of the premiere, defended himself against the charges of encouraging communist activity.⁴⁴

Most importantly, the rehearsal process and the performances of *Judgment Day* in Helsinki coincided with the preparation of the court case against a high-class political prisoner, the communist leader Toivo Antikainen. The *Tulenkantajat* magazine referred to the upcoming Antikainen process as a new Dimitrov

⁴² Turtiainen 1980, 54, 157, 176; Kajava 1990, 206.

⁴³ Turtiainen 1966.

⁴⁴ "Ent. toimittaja Jarno Pennanen juttu", *Helsingin Sanomat* 16 May 1935, p. 11.

case and wrote that a grand drama was being performed in the state prison under the direction of government prosecutors: "It is like history repeating itself, yesterday Leipzig, today Helsinki. [...] Soon it might be that Göring and van der Lubbe can be found behind the props."⁴⁵ Performing *Judgment Day* strengthened and illustrated this claim as the cultural opposition received political character in its struggle for human rights during the year of 1935.

It is important to stress that the activism of the amateur actors was not limited to the stage; rather, performing political theatre was just part of their activism. Co-operating with Antikainen's mother, the amateur actors of the Workers' Stage distributed underground manifestos and gathered signatures against the death penalty. Uniting liberal and socialist intellectuals along with radical workers, the Finnish Union for Human Rights was consequentially founded in the autumn of 1935.⁴⁶

However, it seems that the connection between the liberals and the radical left loosened soon afterwards. Many of the intellectuals that contributed to the performances also left the stage after *Judgment Day*. Most importantly, the director, Nyrki Tapiovaara, left his post as the artistic leader, thus distancing himself from openly political theatre.⁴⁷ Academic socialists continued to lead the way for the Workers' Stage, but (with some exceptions) they left performing to the working-class actors.

CONTROVERSIAL AFTERMATH

The activist left-wing opposition continued its struggle. During the decisive sessions of the court case against Antikainen (resulting in a life sentence) in May 1936, the newspapermen Vala and Adler escorted foreign journalists to the session hall, thus winning the case international visibility.⁴⁸ Throughout the year 1935, *Tulenkantajat* cited foreign newspapers criticizing the political develop-

⁴⁵ *Tulenkantajat* 30 March 1935.

⁴⁶ Pajunen 1976, 125; Pennanen 1970, 209; Hyvönen 1971, 268.

⁴⁷ However, Tapiovaara did return in order to direct Clifford Odets' *Paradise Lost* at the Workers' Stage in February 1937.

⁴⁸ The police report from the Antikainen court case from 25 to 28 May 1936, Helmer Adler's file, The Archive of the State Police, The National Archives.

ment in Finland. Annoyed by the writings, the Ministry of Justice accused the magazine in April 1936 of defaming the courts of justice and public authorities. Although Vala was sentenced to four months in prison, the authorities still expressed their dissatisfaction with the verdict and wanted the *Tulenkantajat* magazine to be abolished.⁴⁹

The parliamentary elections in July 1936 resulted in a victory, with the help of communist votes, for the social democrats and thus to the aspirations of the Popular Front movement. As the notorious government refused to resign, yet another scandal occurred in the aftermath of the elections. As already mentioned, the state police observed the people involved in the Popular Front suspecting them of communist connections. In a secret memorandum ordered by the Prime Minister Kivimäki, the state police named several trustworthy liberal politicians, distinguished intellectuals, and celebrated artists as being part of the suspicious Popular Front activism. Publishing the memorandum as a 'literary supplement' in September 1936, Erkki Vala and his *Tulenkantajat* magazine caused the scandalous resignation of the government and a general uproar against the state police. The leaking journalist, Erkki Vala had succeeded in orchestrating the counter-hegemonic intervention.⁵⁰

Although the course of governmental politics now moved to more permissive directions, the outcome of the intervention for the activists and communists was controversial. The members of the left-wing opposition, including Vala and several academic socialists around the Workers' Stage, were stripped of their membership of the Social Democratic Party in 1937 as the Social Democrats formed a government together with the Agrarian and Liberal Parties. At the same time, the Party banned the oppositional magazines of *Tulenkantajat*, *Kirjallisuuslehti* and *Soihdu* forbidding party members to circulate them.⁵¹ Getting

⁴⁹ The accusation letter of the public prosecutor against *Tulenkantajat* to the Helsinki City Court on 21 April 1936 and Turku Court of Appeal on 25 August 1936, Coll. 8, Erkki Vala's archive, SKS Literary Archives.

⁵⁰ Hietaniemi 1992, 196-8; Lackman 2009, 227.

⁵¹ Soikkanen 1975, 582.

rid of the trouble-makers, the SDP wanted to be considered as a reliable and responsible political partner for bourgeois parties.

As for the Workers' Stage, the left-wing or 'communist' character of the theatre grew in strength. Contemporary American plays from the repertoire of the Theatre Union and The Group Theatre (New York) continued to be an important part of its repertoire. The theatre went on to stage *Peace on Earth* by George Sklar and Albert Maltz in 1935 followed by Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* and *Paradise Lost*, as well as the monologue *I can't sleep* in 1937.

In the context of the Popular Front, however, the production of *Judgment Day* remained its peak and the best example of a wide co-operation between different social and political groups in support of a common aim: human and civil rights including freedom of speech. As the social democrats banned the theatre, the Workers' Stage became politically isolated and marginalized. The success of their performances nonetheless brought the theatre new performers and audiences, especially from the ranks of the communist youth and speech choirs. Among the actors were several convicted communists who could now concentrate on cultural work. At the same time, however, some members of the theatre were recruited for underground activism, e.g. illegal communist printing and volunteering for the Spanish Civil War in 1936-37.⁵²

Another factor weakening the position of the Finnish extreme left were Stalin's purges, crushing the Finnish communists in the Soviet Union in 1937-38. When the Soviet Union pressured Finland in the autumn of 1939, its actions were condemned also by the majority of the communists among the Workers' Stage.⁵³ After the Winter War of 1939-40, however, the academic socialists and communists once again collaborated in order to establish friendly relations with

⁵² Among the new actors of the theatre in 1935-36, there were at least five men who had been earlier convicted for communist activity. One of them was recruited for illegal printing. In addition, two other actors left the theatre in order to take part in the Spanish Civil War. Pajunen 1976, 11-12; The files of Paavo Grönlund, Vietto Kyllönen, Edvin Lindholm, Holger Vigren and Kauno Viitanen, The Archive of the State Police, The National Archives.

⁵³ Toivo Kallio's report 25 September 1939, Kössi Leino's file, The Archive of the State Police, The National Archives.

the Soviet Union. When Finland entered another war against the Soviet Union in 1941, the political activism of this group was crushed by the state police. Several activists who had contributed to the performances of the Workers' Stage sat in prison until the war was over in 1944. The director of *Judgment Day*, Nyrki Tapiovaara lost his life in the Winter War, while Helmer Adler, a suspected spy closely followed by the state police, committed suicide in December 1940.

To sum up, the case of the Workers' Stage shows how an amateur theatre, being an organic part of a larger activist movement, was able to open up a counter-public sphere uniting intellectuals and workers. With an openly political message, the performance of *Judgment Day* set the struggle for civil rights in Finland in the larger frame of the international struggle against Fascism and the Popular Front. Moreover, the theatre and its activist personnel functioned as a physical platform for the practical organizing of the counter-hegemonic intervention. The activism had clear political results in the 1936 elections, although the personal outcome for the activist artists and communists turned out to be controversial, as they remained rejected from the new hegemony. It can be argued that for the activist left-wing opposition, theatre functioned as an extension of their journals, as a (counter-)public sphere and a vehicle to demonstrate contemporary political problems, accelerate the public discussion, and set people – workers and intellectuals – in a fruitful interaction. As a gathering point, the theatre combined political agitation with a practical and largely underground activist movement.

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